

# Latin American Coalition Support: Lessons Learned in Iraq

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**D**ELEGATES to the 2005 Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) Conference and students of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Officer Course (CSGCOC) gleaned several lessons learned from the deployment of four Latin American task forces (TFs) during Operation Iraqi Freedom.<sup>1</sup> Their analysis arrived at several recommendations for the desired end state for filling capability gaps and for improving their operations in support of Coalition forces during the Global War on Terrorism. Their approach was to detail the experiences of Latin American allies using DOTMLPF domains (doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities) as learning points.

## Doctrine

A new doctrinal concept should include the means for providing full-time U.S. military liaison support and formalized advance reconnaissance doctrine. When two or more armed forces work together, they inevitably generate friction when they come into contact. Assigning full-time liaison officers (LNOs) helps reduce such friction. In Operation Iraqi Freedom, for example, interactions of U.S. and Central American TF logistical systems created friction. Nicaragua's task force could not obtain enough medical equipment to treat Iraqi civilians as planned. As another example, the Dominican Republic's task force was reluctant to use the tactical vehicles they received because low maintenance levels presented a real possibility of stranding soldiers in the desert. In another instance, El Salvador's task force received M16A2 ammunition that was unusable in their weapons. And, Honduras's task force eventually received promised new radios, but radio operators needed extensive home-station training to maximize the

radios' capabilities. None of the task forces received their uniforms and boots on time, and when they did arrive, they were too large. Honduran soldiers also endured 10 days of extremely low temperatures before their cold-weather gear arrived.<sup>2</sup>

These friction points did not prevent Latin American soldiers from completing their missions, but even so, valuable time and energy were lost. These and other friction problems could be alleviated by assigning full-time LNOs to coalition units from pre-deployment to redeployment. A split operational detachment from the 7th Special Forces Group or teams of Latin American foreign area officers would make excellent LNOs. In addition, U.S. Army National Guard (ARNG) and U.S. Army Reserve (USAR) units (specifically USAR civil affairs units, Puerto Rico ARNG and USAR units, and engineer units) have spent significant time in Latin America. They would also be good sources for obtaining LNOs. Where the LNOs come from, however, is not as important as what they know. Liaison team members must understand Latin America and be fully conversant with its militaries and cultures. Each team should include a commander, an operations officer or noncommissioned officer (NCO), an engineer or logistics officer or NCO, and a communications specialist. An experienced LNO could—

- Show the TF S4 the fastest way to order replacement parts to maintain TF vehicles.
- Help the S4 navigate the Byzantine U.S. logistics system to obtain difficult-to-find parts.
- Prevent delay in delivering cold-weather uniforms.
- Provide knowledge of a country's capacity to make its own uniforms.
- Explain key differences between various types of apparently similar ammunition.

- Show a task force how to use sophisticated communications equipment.

With Latin American militaries fulfilling new missions outside their countries' borders, it is important to establish policies for successful deployments. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, Latin American task forces identified advance reconnaissance as a positive measure to repeat in future deployments. Advance reconnaissance supports mission analysis, identifies organizational shortfalls, and helps define necessary training. Honduras's and Nicaragua's militaries used it to focus planning. El Salvadoran TF leaders used it to validate task organization. Latin American militaries should formalize procedures for executing advance reconnaissance. Key reconnaissance personnel can also help focus information-gathering for mission analysis.

## Organization

Considerations related to organization should include strategies for deploying units to become self-sufficient and to clearly establish missions. New roles and missions call for new organizations. Latin American task forces did not use standard formations. They task-organized for Operation Iraqi Freedom based on the mission and a personnel cap of 300 soldiers, which the United States set. In theory, national units are modular and can be easily combined to form international units. In reality, differences in equipment and maintenance systems prevent such easy combinations. Each national unit must come with the logistical support it normally receives from its higher echelons.

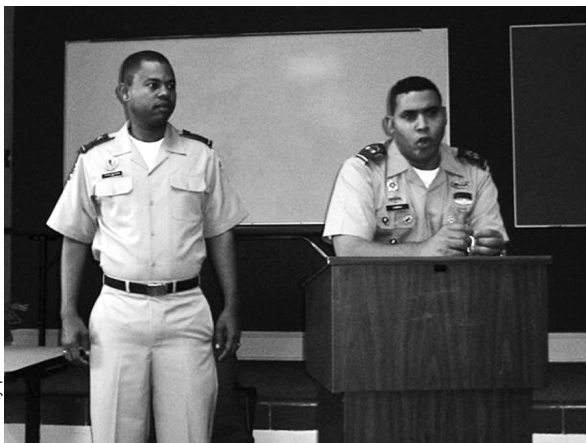
The Dominican Republic ultimately formed a flexible task force by adding logistics personnel

with weapons, communications, maintenance, transportation, and medical capabilities and by using army, marine, air force, and national police elements. The Salvadoran task force assumed each country would be responsible for its own logistical support and assigned a logistics company to achieve self-sufficiency. Nicaragua created a robust logistical element by combining all logistics soldiers and capacities into a centralized transportation and service detachment under one supervisor.

Commanders of future task forces should be prepared to alter their formations, task organize for the mission, and centralize and augment their logistical elements. When establishing force caps, the United States should understand that task forces must augment logistical units in order to achieve sustainability. Arbitrarily low force caps can lead to insufficient operational forces.

The United States also can help future TF commanders organize their units by providing a clear mission at the earliest possible time. In Iraq, the Latin American task forces faced tasks not outlined in the mission. The Dominican task force had to escort convoys, train Iraqis, and provide security to civilians. The Nicaraguan task force deployed with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and planned to operate as an intact unit; however, once it arrived, higher echelon commanders tried to break it up and assign it new tasks. The Salvadoran task force focused on security during its first deployment. During its second deployment it focused on the defensive. Its third deployment emphasized humanitarian aid and civil-military activities. Honduras's task force conducted a range of operations. Because of the range, variety, and shifting nature of their missions, focusing their training was difficult.

Future TF commanders should analyze the mission in detail to establish task organizations, identify the need for specialized personnel, and plan the necessary training. While memorandums of understanding should identify all potential requirements, it is always wise to construct a task force flexible enough to react to unexpected situations. Once a coalition task force has deployed, it has little latitude to reorganize. Normally, task forces must wait 6 months for the next contingent of troops to arrive before making changes in task organization. To the greatest extent possible, the United States should establish fixed missions for its coalition teammates.



Dominican officers briefing lessons learned.

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Salvadoran soldiers before desert uniforms arrived.

## Training and Leadership

Training must focus on the mission. Task force units have limited time to prepare for deployment and to train for the missions they will perform in-theater. They must use time wisely. Of the 16 tasks required of the Latin American task forces, the training of Iraqi security forces was particularly noteworthy.<sup>3</sup>

The Salvadorans trained Iraqis to do simple tasks like man checkpoints so the task force could focus on other tasks. The four task forces also considered cultural training important. Honduras used one of its citizens, who had been born in Iraq, to speak with its soldiers about Iraqi culture. Each of the task forces trained hard, but 16 tasks are a lot to master. Ideally, when the United States invites countries to participate in operations, it ought to invite them to train at U.S. combat training centers (CTCs) to facilitate their integration into the U.S.-led coalition.

## Materiel

Troops must train with the equipment they are going to use. Unfortunately, all four Latin American task forces began training without having the actual equipment they were to use. For example, Honduran soldiers conducted communications training without radios. The Dominican Republic's and Nicaragua's equipment also did not arrive as scheduled. The two task forces received new arms and equipment only after arriving in-theater, where they had to learn how to use the equipment while on the move.

In an effort to standardize equipment, the task forces received new communications gear, which necessitated more training. This requirement would not have arisen if the United States had originally

supplied standardized equipment to the four countries' militaries. It did not, however, because military aid was dispensed by several different programs. However, when the United States provides funds to other countries for equipment, it should ensure equipment commonality.

The United States should also provide new equipment to coalition task forces as early as possible so that when training begins troops will have the clothing and equipment they will need to complete their missions. If at all possible, the task

forces should receive radios and other equipment in their home countries and meet up with their vehicles at an intermediate staging point.

## Personnel

Considerations should be given to assigning LNOs to higher echelons, establishing pre-deployment policies, and developing morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) programs. To adapt to other nations' procedures and harmonize coordination, most armies have experienced LNOs who speak several languages. El Salvador used LNOs to solve problems caused by differences between the Salvadoran personnel reporting system and those of higher echelons. The Dominican LNO overcame a complex logistical system by using personal connections he established during deployment. The Hondurans did not realize that medicines were a special class of supply and did not receive blood and medicines until it was explained that they had to use Class VIII (Medical) channels. All of the Latin American countries lost valuable time trying to learn U.S. systems while on the job.

Individual TF planners must determine how many LNOs their units need when calculating the size of the force, and as the four task forces found out, LNOs should speak English. Although El Salvador has an Armed Forces Language Center, the United States can help develop Latin American English speakers by providing international military education training (IMET) such as WHINSEC'S CGSOC or Captains Career Course (C3). The education LNOs receive from IMET and from interaction with U.S. staffs reduces the need for on-the-job training.





El Salvador Army

**Religious services in-theater.**

When Latin American staffs began training for deployment, they encountered a general lack of personnel documentation. Many soldiers did not have passports, and logistical troops did not have driver's licenses for military vehicles. This was symptomatic of the absence of formal systems used to verify soldier readiness. The United States has such systems because it must be prepared to send forces around the world on little or no notice, but Latin American armies usually do not deploy outside their own borders, much less to the other side of the world.

All four countries improvised pre-deployment soldier readiness processes. Based on an analysis of deployment experiences, future TF staffs should, at a minimum, develop pre-deployment procedures to check on passports, powers of attorney, identity cards and tags, driver's licenses, medical and dental

records, immunizations, and family liaison information. Also, as early as possible, U.S. planners should notify the task forces of special theater requirements, such as the need for specific medications, visas, and so on.

MWR programs help soldiers focus on the mission by helping to alleviate anxiety about their families. All four countries improvised programs for the well-being of their soldiers and their families. El Salvador established family support groups in San Salvador to help with such issues as missed rent payments or family illnesses and arranged video teleconferences between soldiers in Iraq and family members back home. The Honduran and Salvadoran task forces shared a Catholic priest for religious services. Nicaragua allowed soldiers to use satellite phones to call their families. However, MWR programs should not end when a task force leaves the theater of operation. For example, Dominican soldiers returning home received medical aid, psychological review, religious counseling, and family assistance.

## Facilities

The analysis of facilities reiterated the importance of having host-nation training facilities and properly established base camps. The Honduras task force trained with U.S. forces at Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras, where Joint Task Force Bravo is located. The other task forces were unable to train with U.S. forces and equipment before operations began. Allowing all task forces to experience a CTC rotation would enhance their preparation, but these countries do not have such training facilities. If allowing them access to a CTC or other U.S. training facility is not feasible, U.S. planners cannot expect the task forces to be as well prepared as their U.S. counterparts.

In Iraq's austere environment, base camps often seem uninhabitable and indefensible at first. All four Latin American countries had to modify

their assigned facilities to make them livable and secure before they could conduct operations. For example, almost all of the task forces had to emplace higher caliber weapons to secure their perimeters, and some task



Honduras Army

**Honduran base camp in Iraq.**



**Mortars were added for base security.**

forces had to set up separate lodgings for men and women. The Honduran task force, with contractor support, had to construct dining rooms, laundries, showers, and protective obstacles. When Honduras assigned a camp commander, the other countries followed suit. All of the task forces had expected that their base camp would be ready on their arrival. A base camp in a foreign country can be as complex as a city. Future TF commanders should follow the four countries' examples and assign a capable officer as camp commander. LNOs can show the task force how to work effectively with contractors to improve base camps.

## Benefits for the Future

How can we make future Latin American deployments easier? Our first suggestion is to use IMET funds to send students to the United States to train at our basic branch schools, command and general staff colleges, war colleges, or CTCs. A combat multiplier would be to augment the IMET budgets of countries that participate in deployments of crucial interest to the United States. Each contingent would benefit from having officers who had trained in the United States and with WHINSEC. Two WHINSEC courses that offer the skill sets officers need are C3 and CGSCOC, both of which are taught in Spanish. In these courses, international officers have the opportunity to learn how a U.S. Army staff operates and to gain understanding of the U.S. military decisionmaking process.

The Army should also dispatch an LNO element

to each unit, and that element should be with the unit for from 2 to 3 months before the unit deploys until the unit returns to its home country. Such liaison elements would ensure continuous interaction with U.S. logistics systems and operational continuity in-theater. A U.S. LNO trained to work with Latin American militaries could reduce friction, help the foreign military use U.S. systems, and help manage expectations.

Overall, Latin American TF deployments were successful. However, these were not NATO units that had years of experience working with the United States. There is work to be done to overcome shortcomings across the DOTMLPF spectrum. These countries continue to support U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere and beyond. El Salvador continues to deploy forces to Operation Iraqi Freedom. Honduras is planning a deployment to Haiti for stability and security operations. The United States and these countries share many common interests. We must get better at supporting them as we work together in pursuit of shared objectives. **MR**

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## NOTES

1. The Latin American task forces were from the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras.

2. Ironically, the four countries could have quickly had the correct number of uniforms in the exact sizes needed if the United States had sent them the desert camouflage fabric.

3. The 16 tasks required of the Latin American task forces include the following: integration training (rules of engagement), culture, climate, doctrine, and tactics, techniques, and procedures; escorts, checkpoints, and VIP security; mounted and dismounted patrols (day and night); base security and management; logistics training (drivers, medics, arms room personnel); maintenance on coalition vehicles; driving in urban areas; casualty evacuation/medical evacuation; identifying bombs/improvised explosive devices; how to react to hostages, ambushes, and mortar attacks; and training Iraqi security forces; training on new equipment; training new rotations with the previous unit.

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